

Mexican/US Cultural Resources Expanding a Partnership

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The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is regarded by many as the beginning of a new partnership with Mexico—a partnership that will extend far beyond trade issues alone. If so, this partnership will come at an opportune time for NPS and will build on an established record of NPS interest and commitment to cooperation with Mexican conservation efforts.

There are convincing reasons for our interests in Mexico's national parks and cultural sites. Not the least of these are the statutory responsibilities we have for cooperation under the World Heritage Convention, the Convention on Nature Protection in the Western Hemisphere, and related U.S. public law directing NPS involvement.

The National Park Service, by virtue of its long experience and park management responsibilities along 28% of the 2,000-mile border with Mexico, has a particular and vested self-interest in the implications of regional and transboundary influences on our parks, and in the shared resources of those and other sites in the context of the pre-history and history of both nations. Recognizing the futility of effective resource conservation and management in this area without close and ongoing professional collaboration with conservation authorities in Mexico, NPS entered into a cooperative agreement with its natural resources counterpart, the Secretariat for Urban Development and Ecology (SEDUE), in 1989. Its successor agency for natural heritage, the Secretariat for Social Development (SEDESOL), is negotiating with NPS the terms of an extension of this agreement.

With growing Servicewide awareness of the need for a strengthened cooperative approach with Mexico, the Office of International Affairs, WASO, and Southwest Regional Director John Cook agreed in 1992 to jointly support the establishment of a decentralized field office to coordinate and advance NPS responsibilities with Mexico. This unit, the Mexican Affairs Office (MAO), was set up and staffed at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces.*

Its primary functions are to implement joint projects approved under the SEDUE/SEDESOL agreement and to encourage the necessary international dialogue among the many groups concerned with ecology and cultural heritage protection in the border region.

A visionary dream of those supporting establishment of Big Bend National Park on the Rio Grande in southwestern Texas (created in 1944) was to influence corresponding Mexican protected areas across the border, and to achieve the joint designation of an international park by both governments. The dream has been kept alive since the administration of Franklin Roosevelt, and is

making strong progress in the current NPS cooperative program with Mexico.

Similar potential for coordinated designations and management has long been perceived for Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in southern Arizona ("proclaimed" in 1937). Part of the Sonoran desert ecosystem, Organ Pipe Cactus NM was designated a Biosphere Reserve by a United Nations' agency in 1976. However, the more significant portion of the desert—in terms of size and the integrity of its natural state—is in Mexico. Mexican President Salinas gave formal recognition to the area's significance in 1993 with the establishment of a vast new protected area known as the "Pinacate Biosphere Reserve."

In the cultural sphere, strong ties have been established with the Mexican National Institute for Anthropology and History (INAH). A proposed cooperative agreement between INAH and NPS has been under discussion, and now awaits formal negotiation under authority of the Secretariat of External Relations of Mexico and the US Department of State. Mutual interests include archeological sites, native American communities, artifacts protection, submerged resources, and sites that commemorate the often contentious Mexican-US relationship of the last 150 years. The INAH-NPS agreement will address exchanges of specialists and information, training, and joint projects to plan for conservation of cultural sites and objects.

One effort which visibly symbolizes the new era of relations between the two nations centers on the newly authorized and expanded Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site near Brownsville, TX. The site will commemorate and interpret the first battle of the Mexican War. As such, it seeks to address, openly and cooperatively, an event with significant negative connotations for the Mexican people. The legislation creating the park stresses that the interpretation of the war and the battle must be made with a balanced historical perspective for both countries. It further authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to enter into agreements with the Mexican government for the planning, development, and management of the site.

As a true community of North American interest is further developed, it will be evident that NPS relationships with our Mexican counterparts will grow in their dimensions and importance.

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